

“Seduced by Serpents”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
February 26, 2023 – First Sunday in Lent
[Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11](#)

Good morning, friends. I hope that you are all happy campers on this first Sunday of Lent. Once upon a time -- or actually many, many times in the past -- I found myself being the happiest of campers when happily camping. Growing up in Colorado, a lot of my nights as a child and young person were spent in a tent, and some of my happiest memories are of camping somewhere high in the mountains of Colorado with my church friends as week-long camping trips were always part of our summer youth group schedule. When not camping in a tent up in the mountains, I still enjoyed, as a child, being in a tent in my family’s back yard, which was just a couple miles outside of the mountains west of Denver. And when living outside of Denver for a few years after graduating from college in Kansas, I often found peace and rejuvenation by camping alone somewhere in the mountains or somewhere else in the vast expanses of uninhabited grasslands or dry wilderness areas that can be found throughout the Centennial State. Some of the most peaceful moments of my life have been enjoyed while camping out in some of Colorado’s most remote, desolate, and dry wilderness areas.

Today’s reading from Matthew tells of Jesus also camping out in a remote, dry wilderness area for 40 days and 40 nights, but not as means to find happiness or peace. For Jesus, and for his ancestors whose stories are told in the Hebrew Bible, the wild desert was not a place to find peace, but, quite the opposite; the wilderness was a place to face difficulties, to experience times of trial and tribulation and to be prepared by them for some greater task or experience. Most notably, the whole people of Israel experienced such a time in their 40 years of wandering through the dry wilderness, where they often grumbled about the lack of food and water, after Moses led them into the desert lands east of Egypt. Like his ancestors, Jesus experienced in his own time in the desert great hunger, as he spent 40 days in the wild without food. His time of trial became even more difficult when he was visited by a character called the tempter, the devil, and Satan, meaning adversary, who tried to convince Jesus to use his power to satisfy and glorify himself. Jesus, however, passed the test by not following the

adversarial trickster's advice. Jesus went to the desert to face the difficulties of fasting and trusting in God alone for survival, and though he was tempted exchange his difficulties for ease and prosperity, he remained steadfast in trusting in God alone and he hungrily endured his wilderness moment to prepare him to trusting in God alone during the time of ministry that he was about to begin.

Our first reading from Genesis also tells us about the ancient trickster at work, though not in a dry wilderness, but in the lush Garden of Eden, which unlike the desert was a place designating peace and prosperity. In the garden, there was no hunger or lack of any good thing. It was a place where God and people dwelled together in peace and where people found fulfillment in doing the work that God had graciously given to them, to "till" and "keep" the land. People were to find meaning and peace not in living carefree lives of leisure, but in living as active stewards and caretakers of the good earth God had made.

They were given the freedom to do their work as they chose and to enjoy eating the abundant fruits of the garden's trees as they willed, but there were limits to their freedom. Specifically, they were given the boundary of not eating of this one tree: The tree of knowledge of good and evil. Apparently, they were able to follow the guidelines just fine until the crafty serpent came along and convinced them to do otherwise. The serpent told the woman that if she would just eat of the tree's fruit, she would become like God, with the ability to experience enlightenment and control all knowledge. And so, seeing that the fruit looked tasty and believing it would empower them to be like God, the woman and the man disobeyed the one rule they were given.

In choosing to disobey God and eat the fruit, they demonstrated that they were more concerned about their own gain than they were about simply enjoying their life's work as God had intended for them to do. They exchanged being selfless servants of the earth and its plants and creatures as they sought to serve only themselves. In selfishly breaking the rule, they broke the trust that God had placed in them, and the purity of their relationship with God was broken. They themselves were broken as their eyes were opened and they knew through own experience their potential to disobey God and do evil as well as good.

We know all too well that the power we have, to either do the good work God has given us as caretakers of God's world to do what we will to serve, enrich, and

glorify ourselves, has led to people to great heights and depths, and too often we have chosen paths that lead not upward but downward into depravity. Still seduced by slithering serpents, too often we choose to selfishly glorify ourselves at the expense of others instead of living our calling to be loving caretakers of one another and this planetary home we share. In each of our lives, we choose the path of glory and end up experiencing personal brokenness. We seek to gain, not give, through our relationships, causing them to be marred by brokenness. When we gather in communities, we often do so in ways that encourage our own group to grow in power at the expense of others. This is true for the Christian Church throughout the world and for each local house of faith, in which we dream of the growth of Christendom or the domination of Christ's Church over the rest of the world's people. Too many in our own nation hold the dream (or nightmare) of Christian nationalism, seeking for white evangelical Christianity to be preeminent in America and for its ways and its theology to become the ways of living and believing that all adhere to or bow down to. And too many of the world's nations seek their own glory at the expense of their neighbors, as is the case this morning in Ukraine, invaded and devastated over the course of the last year by their power and glory hungry neighbor, who had already occupied large swaths of Ukraine, having invaded and claimed much of its land almost a decade ago.

Our glory-seeking ways, whether they are of nations, religious or political groups, or families or individuals, lead only to brokenness and death. However, if we can resist the seduction of the serpents and choose instead to do the work God has given us to do, to lovingly care for and serve God's garden, we will find wholeness and life for others and ourselves.

As our journey through Lent has now begun, and we are in a season of turning toward God and returning to God, let us travel on the path that leads us to God and to life. Let us find that path and stay on that path as it leads us through the dry desert-like places and the verdant gardenlike places, through the quiet wilderness and the noisy city. In this season and always, let us be humble and be faithful, joyfully accepting God's will for us to do good and bless, that we might find ourselves blessed and at peace. Amen.